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MYSTERY MAN OF AMERICAN DIPLOMACY

In the middle of a snowy night in 1942, an FBI agent slipped into a US Army barracks at Fort Ethan Allen, Vermont, and tiptoed down an aisle of sleeping recruits. Stopping at one bunk, the FBI man gently shook one of the soldiers awake and showed him his badge.

"What will you do for your country?" the man asked.

"Anything," the sleepy soldier replied.

Thus began what Lieutenant General Vernon A. Walters would describe years later as "my first intelligence assignment," a mission to infiltrate a group of Nazi spies broadcasting to German submarines from the nearby Stowe ski area. Walters was president of the ski club at the Army base; he had been educated in Europe and spoke German.

"I performed this mission to the satisfaction of the FBI," he recounted in his memoirs, *Secret Missions*, published in 1978. "Later they were to send me a cryptically worded letter of commendation. It arrived at the battalion two or three days before I was to leave to go ro Officers Candidate School. I thought that it would do me much more good to receive it there than at Fort Ethan Allen and arranged to have it strategically delayed a few weeks."

Today, after thirty-four years in the US Army and a four-year stint as deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Walters is one of the Reagan administration's most important foreign policy officials, a kind of Lone Ranger for the new "quiet diplomacy." But Walters has also become the mystery man of American foreign policy, avoiding the congressional spotlight, refusing on-the-record interviews with journalists, and constantly traveling the world for behind-closed-doors meetings with presidents, dictators, and revolutionaries.

Walters aides turned down repeated requests for interviews with him. "It just makes his job more difficult," one of them explained. "He likes to move around discreetly."

"He works alone," retired CIA officer Dino Brugioni, a Walters admirer, says. "But when he goes out, he's prepared. He doesn't do anything in a halfway fashion. He's a real pro."

Since joining the State Department as ambassador at large early in the administration, Walters has secretly been a key back-channel emissary to Zaire, Kenya, Morocco, Ceylon, India, Nepal, Angola, El Salvador, Argentina, Zambia, and other countries. He has been a key participant in sensitive negotiations over Central America, the Falklands, and Southern Africa. In March, he slipped off to Havana for a four-hour chat with Fidel Castro.

"Hell, he probably just took out his American Express Gold Card and rented a plane in Miami," says Miles Frechette, head of the State Department's Cuba desk, with a laugh. "Of course," he quickly adds, "we're not confirming that he even went there."

By Jeff Stein

Walters' rise through the ranks is, on the face of it, amazing. He is a retired general who never commanded troops. He was a deputy director of the CIA though he never graduated from college. And he became one of the country's most trusted diplomats before he had spent a day in the State Department or an hour as a Wall Street lawyer — the usual route to the diplomatic service.

Walters speaks at least eight languages, maybe more. Within those eight are many dialects he is said to have mastered. It is reported that he likes to slip into a country unannounced before a meeting with a head of state so he can ride the buses around and pick up the local slang and intonation. In his memoirs, Walters explains the importance he places on language. "In the unending struggle for freedom," he writes, "we must be able to communicate with those who wish to be free. Too long have we expected all our friends to speak English."

WALTERS' DIPLOMATIC ASSIGNments since the first months of the Reagan administration suggest that his principal mission has been to interpret the renewed American attitude of friendship to Latin American military dictators. His appointment was in fact the clearest possible signal to these regimes of a policy reversal from the human rights years of the Carter administration.

"He is an example of the importance this administration puts on getting along with military dictatorships," says retired US Navy admiral Gene LaRocque, head of the Washington-based Center for Defense Infor-

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